

## Introduction

# Family Ethics

Steinar Bøyum & Espen Gamlund

Recent years have seen a surge in philosophical interest in the family, to the point where family ethics has now become an important and established part of moral and political philosophy. The increased attention may in part reflect actual changes in the family as a social institution over the last decades. While still ideologically dominant, the traditional nuclear family has been superseded by a variety of different family forms in many countries, to varying degrees. The attention may also be due to advances in reproductive technology, which puts pressure on the question of what it is to be a parent, and which threatens, or promises, to raise ever more difficult ethical questions in the coming decades. Lastly, the heightened attention may also reflect developments within philosophy, in particular the growing concern with what are often called “special obligations” or “associative duties”.

One might see family ethics as spanning a continuum from bioethics to philosophy of education. At one end, we find questions bordering on bioethics. In the face of developments in biotechnology, the ethics of procreation has become a hotbed of debate. What is a parent, and who shall count as parents? Do people have a right to have children, and if so, what grounds such a right? Should we adopt rather than procreate, and what about surrogacy? At the other end of this continuum we find questions bordering on philosophy of education. Which rights should parents have regarding the education of their children? Should parents, for example, have the right to inculcate religious views in their children, or send them to religious schools? At issue here is the proper sharing of authority over education between the state, parents, and children themselves. And in between these two poles we find the heart of family ethics, questions concerning moral relations within the family. These relations are centred on, though not exclusively concerned with, the parent-child relationship: what can and should parents do for or with their children?

Accordingly, much of the attention in family ethics has focused on the rights and duties of parents (although it should be mentioned that some still take exception to couching family ethics in the language of rights). These include rights and duties towards existing children, but also rights and duties towards prospective children. Some scholars have also been interested in the rights and duties of children, both younger and adult children, whereas others have taken an ethical interest in familial relations other than those between parents and children. A closely related set of questions concerns the value of the family, what good and bad it may bring for its members and for society as a whole, as well as the value of parenting and of childhood. Here we should mention in particular the influential work of Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, culminating in their 2014 book, *Family Values: The Ethics of Parent-Child Relationships*.

For this special issue of the *Nordic Journal of Applied Ethics*, we have selected four papers that address, directly or indirectly, some of the issues just outlined. In the opening paper, “The moral status of the (nuclear) family”, Daniela Cutas and Anna Smajdor discuss how current policy often implies an implicit belief in the independent moral status of the family. This means that the family is held to have an intrinsic moral value that may even be in conflict with, and eclipse, the interests of its members. This is particularly problematic for the

most vulnerable members of the family, that is to say, women and children. Part of being accorded moral status is that the family is seen as something that we, both as individuals and as society, have an obligation to protect. Through analysing several real-life examples, the authors claim that the family is often understood as being worthy of protection even when this may harm its members.

One poignant example of the moral status of the family is Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Cutas and Smajdor note that elsewhere in the Declaration, reference is almost always to individuals, but in this article it is *the family* that is “entitled to protection”, since it is “the natural and fundamental group unit of society”. Moreover, when the family is accorded intrinsic moral value in policy contexts, it is usually a specific kind of family that is accorded this status, namely, the traditional nuclear family. The authors end by suggesting that the individual moral status of family members may be in irreconcilable conflict with that of the family as a conceptual entity, and that we therefore may have to rethink the status of the latter.

In “Who counts as a parent for the purposes of filial obligations?” Cameron Fenton challenges what he calls “the traditional account of parenthood”, according to which every child has a mother and a father who are biologically related to the child. He argues that using the traditional account of the family can be problematic for theories of filial obligations. Filial obligations are special obligations that adult children have towards their parents. Fenton goes on to propose his own definition of who counts as a parent: it is someone who takes care of the child’s needs, nurtures and cares for her, and shows a long-term interest in the child’s development into an adult. According to this definition, anyone who fulfils these obligations can be a parent, and having a biological connection to a child is neither necessary nor sufficient in order to serve as a parent. What matters is the extent to which a parent serves in the role of someone who takes care of the child’s interests.

Fenton goes on to examine the implications of his account of parenthood for three cases of alternative family structures: adoption, surrogacy, and extended family. He argues that his proposed role-based understanding of parenthood allows us to make better sense of these cases than what is achieved by a traditional biological account of parenthood. For one thing, it includes people who should be parents, but who are excluded on the traditional account; for another, it excludes people who should not be parents, but who are included on the traditional account. In short, the role-based account of parenthood shows how children can have filial obligations to more than two people, and to people who are not their biological parents. In the final part of the paper, Fenton addresses some concerns related to having too many parents, and he offers his responses.

How should we think about the relationship between kinship and intimacy? In his paper “Kinship and intimacy”, Hugh LaFollette explores the interconnections between kin and intimate relationships. In proposing a framework for how to think about these relationships, LaFollette makes three important observations. First, not every intimate relationship is a relationship with kin. For example, people are intimate with their spouses or partners and with their closest friends. Second, not all kin relationships are intimate. Two examples stand out. Parents and their grown children sometimes fail to acknowledge one another, and siblings may choose not to have any contact when they grow older. Third, some people may cherish their kin, while other people may cherish their kin without sharing with them the kind of intimacy they might have with a partner or close friend.

These observations give rise to the following questions: should we pursue intimacy with our parents, grown children, siblings, or cousins? Should our society encourage kin to be intimate with one another? Or would all such efforts be morally misguided? LaFollette

acknowledges that there simply isn't a straightforward answer to these questions. Some kin relationships will be governed by intimacy, others will not. Some intimate relationships will be a relationship with kin, others will not. He concludes that every individual should be free to determine the nature of his or her personal relationships, and the role played by kinship and intimacy in those relationships.

In the last paper for this special issue, "Parental vulnerability", Mianna Lotz treats the concept of vulnerability in the context of the family. She notes that although considerable philosophical attention has been given to the vulnerability of children, the vulnerability of parents has been largely ignored. Building on Goodin's seminal analysis of vulnerability, Lotz argues that not only children, but also parents are vulnerable in morally significant ways, notwithstanding their greater power in the parent-child relationship. Thus, we may have an unduly favourable view of the intertwinement of parent and child. That the well-being of the first is inextricably bound up with the well-being of the latter can mean not only satisfaction, but also guilt, anxiety and exhaustion, to name a few negative aspects.

Drawing on both empirical work in the social sciences and general considerations, Lotz elucidates various ways in which parents are made vulnerable in the parent-child relationship. This includes, among other things, the effect of parenthood on well-being, the prevalence of parent abuse, and suppressed emotional ambivalence. In the latter part of her article, Lotz examines the ethical implications of acknowledging parental vulnerability. Although she thinks that parental vulnerability often underpins actual claims to greater parental authority over children, she herself is sceptical that it provides rationally defensible arguments for an extensive authority of this kind. She does argue, though, that acknowledgement of parental vulnerability gives us additional moral reasons for favouring extra-familial support of parenting, for instance in the form of publicly funded childcare, and also for rethinking the still dominant commitment to the traditional nuclear family.

We are very pleased to have served as guest editors for this special issue of the *Nordic Journal of Applied Ethics* on family ethics. We hope the selected papers will stimulate its readership, which in turn will create further thought and discussion on many important ethical issues in the context of the family.

Three additional papers are included in this issue's Open Section. Rafael Robina Ramírez' paper, "Teaching ethics through court judgments in Finance, Accounting, Economics and Business" explores an innovative form of studying ethics for Business, Finance and Accounting students. The article studies the employment of this methodology, which consists in practicing ethical decision-making by relating to court judgments, at a University in Spain. The study concludes that a high number of students responded positively to the method, which aims at developing their ethical competence, thus hopefully promoting more sound business practices in the future.

In "Beyond Proximity: Consequentialist Ethics and System Dynamics," Erika Palmer argues for engaging ethical conversations in the field of system dynamics by investigating consequences of model design and how consequentialist moral philosophy applies to both the modelling process and in communicating with decision-makers. She contends that the modeller should consider the life cycle consequences of using models, since policies developed from models have consequences that may be evaluated as ethical or unethical. The discussion redirects ethical evaluation from the modeller to what the model does, as illustrated by a model of social assistance in Norway in the context of immigration pressures.

Finally, Jennifer Leigh Bailey and May Thorseth, in "Value and Growth: Rethinking Basic Concepts in Lockean Liberalism", argue for reconsidering basic liberal ideas relating to value and growth required for protection of the environment. Bailey and Thorseth take a critical

look at “possessive individualism”, popular among libertarian circles, that prioritizes blocking governmental action to protect the environment because of the primacy of individual rights to property. The authors argue that by revisiting ideas from liberal tradition as represented in the writings of John Locke – specifically his views on private property in combination with his views on the harm principle, the common good, and future generations – we can defend a view that limits individual rights to exploit nature. This view entails that we understand nature as consisting of ecosystems that provide ecosystem goods and services, and that we realize that their protection is essential to protecting the value of individual holdings as well as land held in common. After all, land is valuable if it continues to produce abundantly; failure to protect the ecosystems that provide key services supporting this abundance harms both the property of others and the viability of society. As seen in Locke’s writings, if government should act to protect the abundance of nature, it should, to a certain extent, limit the freedom of individual property owners.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the editors of the *Nordic Journal of Applied Ethics* for the opportunity to serve as guest editors for this special issue. Also, we express our gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and evaluation of the submitted papers. Finally, we thank the authors for their interesting and thought-provoking papers.

## Guest editors for *Etikk i praksis* 1/2017

**Steinar Bøyum** (Professor, Department of Education, University of Bergen).

E-mail: steinar.boyum@uib.no

**Espen Gamlund** (Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of Bergen).

E-mail: Espen.Gamlund@uib.no

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